



House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism

On Assessing US Policy Priorities in the Middle East

Danielle Pletka

Senior Vice President, Foreign and Defense Policy

April 3, 2019

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Wilson, Members of the Committee,

It is always an honor to testify before this Committee, and I'm grateful for the request to speak on this important topic.

If I may, I'd like to suggest an amendment to the question you pose in this hearing: You ask, "What are U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East?" That question cannot be answered without asking what the United States seeks to achieve in the region. If our only interest is the immediate suppression of ISIS, our leaders should feel free to declare "Mission Accomplished" for the few weeks or months in which that mission will, briefly, have been done. But for those of us who recognize that ISIS is the fourth iteration of al Qaeda in Iraq, and that, because of the current shape of the resolution of hostilities in Syria, it will be back in one form or another, sooner or later, the truth is that our mission is far from accomplished. Indeed, it seems right to question what our mission actually is, not just in Syria, but throughout the region. The real question before us is "what is the just and lasting endgame for the United States in the Middle East?"

We can talk about Syria, or Iraq, or Iran, or Yemen or Saudi Arabia in endless detail. And your members can offer more legislation disincentivizing terrorism or incentivizing cooperation with U.S. allies, or arming good guys and sanctioning bad guys; but without an end game, our policies are nothing more than this year's tactics. Every single president of the United States since the end of World War II has been entangled in a crisis in the Middle East for a crisis he did not expect when he was elected. Are we going to continue to be surprised every decade? Are we going to keep pretending we're winning when we're not?

What should our endgame be? To my mind, the right question to ask is how future presidents of the United States can avoid being drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts. There is no simple answer, as, notwithstanding the protestations of some, the problems of the region are national, sectarian, regional, political, and economic in nature. Some have suggested that the right thing is to ignore these conflicts and let the people of the region work them out, if necessary with the attendant death and destruction. After all, why does who governs Syria or Yemen or Iraq impact life in Florida or South Carolina?

The answer is that for the most part, it doesn't, at least not immediately. But because the United States too often waits for a problem to become a crisis, those in the Middle East who are suffering under tyranny, or inequality, or discrimination seek solutions that do have an impact on the United States. Think of the people of Syria turning to ISIS. Or the Shiites of Yemen turning to the Houthis. Or the people of Iran turning to the Ayatollahs. Problems that were smaller and manageable become unmanageable challenges to U.S. interests and security.

The region attracts Salafi-jihadis, outside powers, and sundry bad actors because it is rife with opportunity, and the question before us is whether we want to continue to give them those opportunities. Every time we decide to do so, Americans are put in harm's way. Every time we decide Iran doesn't matter, or Hezbollah doesn't matter, or Shiites get what they deserve, or Saudis deserve to be threatened, or southern Yemenis don't deserve access to their nation's wealth, or Libyans are somehow ungovernable, or Muslims are uninterested in democracy, we open the door to those who seek somehow to resolve these problems.

What should our policies be?

- In Lebanon, to end the fiction that the government is independent of Hezbollah. Any other nation in that situation would not be allowed to have a U.S.-designated terrorist group sitting in the cabinet, and avoid designation itself as a state sponsor.
 - To more aggressively pinpoint Hezbollah financiers and supporters within Lebanon, and to isolate them through financial and travel sanctions.
 - To cut off US assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces until there is conclusive proof there is no cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah.¹
- In Syria, to support Syrian Democratic Forces and oppose the reinstatement of the Assad regime, and to support a diplomatic process committed to creating a transitional government for Syria; to oppose Russian intervention in Syria and to penalize all Iranian involvement in Syria. To keep a sufficient number of U.S. troops in the country to ensure terror groups are defeated and that the Assad regime does not return to the wholesale murder of its people.²
- In Iraq, to end all involvement of the Popular Mobilization Forces, or Hash'd al Shabi, in the Iraqi government; and to provide sufficient support, incentives and disincentives to ensure the limitation of Iranian reach.³
- In Saudi Arabia, to demand the end to the imprisonment and targeting of political dissidents; and to move towards a peace process in Yemen, providing Iran ends all support for Houthi groups, themselves on the way to becoming yet another Hezbollah.⁴
 - To signal to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that global arms sales are contingent on improvements in its rights and military records, and to attempt to secure through diplomacy a consensus on this issue.
- In Yemen, to recognize the complexity of the political situation on the ground, and to impose substantial pressures on both the Iranian-backed Houthis and Saudi-backed parties to come to a dialogue that begins to address the drivers of conflict in Yemen.⁵
 - To understand that al Qaeda and ISIS groups remain in the country, and that continued cooperation with Arab allies to disrupt those groups remains a priority.
- In Iran, to begin to answer the question underpinning the Trump administration's extraordinarily successful sanctions campaign, including, beyond the possible renegotiation of the JCPOA, what the aim behind global sanctions actually is.⁶

¹ Danielle Pletka, "Lebanon and Iraq: After the elections," testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, May 22, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/testimony-lebanon-and-iraq-after-the-elections/>.

² Fred Kagan, "Isolationists won in Syria, but internationalists can prevail," *The Hill*, December 26, 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/422864-isolationists-won-in-syria-but-internationalists-can-prevail>.

³ Kenneth Pollack, "Iraq gets a government—and it was worth the wait," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/iraq-gets-a-government-and-it-was-worth-the-wait/>.

⁴ Danielle Pletka, "Turn Saudi Arabia into a trusted partner in Middle East conflict," *The Hill*, November 4, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/turn-saudi-arabia-into-trusted-partner-in-middle-east-conflict/>.

⁵ Katherine Zimmerman, "Testimony: Taking the lead back in Yemen," testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, March 6, 2019, <http://www.aei.org/publication/testimony-taking-the-lead-back-in-yemen/>.

⁶ Michael Rubin, "Putting American security first in the post-JCPOA order," testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security," June 6, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/testimony-putting-american-security-first-in-the-post-jcpoa-order/>.

- To press the Trump administration as to whether it has a “regime change” strategy in Iran, and if so, who its desired candidates are to replace the existing Islamic Republic’s government.⁷
- To push back more aggressively on Iran’s disruptive interference and arms exports and terrorist support throughout the region, including in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere.
- On Salafi-jihadi groups, including ISIS, al Qaeda and others, to understand that these groups remain resilient, have embraced new tactics and are aggressively coopting new supporters and establishing new beachheads in Africa, South and Southeast Asia.^{8 9}
 - Both the Trump and Obama administration persisted in following whack-a-mole tactics against Salafi-jihadis, failing to understand the enduring power of this ideology or the tactical nature of the engagement. We can never kill enough jihadis to end these movements, and recognizing that, need to begin to recalibrate both our legal strategy and our understanding of the movement’s appeal, such as it is. Only by denying opportunity and territory to these groups are we going to make headway against them.¹⁰
 - Trumpeting an end to the caliphate promises the same future embarrassment to the Trump administration that trumpeting the end of al Qaeda in Iraq did. The question of our victory is not a political one, however, and should be explored in conjunction with the executive branch to begin to look at new ways to preempt rather than simply react to Salafi-jihadis.

There are many more challenges in the region, whether in Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, or between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Our priority should be in getting a long term strategy right rather than constantly addressing the most recent crisis. In addition, our priority should be on problems that might be solved, rather than the perpetual headline seeking that has characterized, for example, the peace process.

The United States can do a lot of good in the Middle East. It’s high time we think about both dealing with challenges and creating opportunities.

Thank you.

⁷ Michael Rubin, “What will Iran’s looming civil war look like?” *The National Interest*, December 15, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/what-will-irans-looming-civil-war-look-like/>.

⁸ Katherine Zimmerman, “Terrorism, tactics, and transformation: The West vs Salafi-jihadi movement,” American Enterprise Institute, November 15, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/terrorism-tactics-and-transformation-the-west-vs-the-salafi-jihadi-movement/>.

⁹ Emily Estelle, “The Islamic State is not defeated in Syria. Or anywhere else. Look at Africa,” *AEIdeas*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-islamic-state-is-not-defeated-in-syria-or-anywhere-else-look-at-africa/>.

¹⁰ Katherine Zimmerman, “Trump doubles down on failed counterterror policy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2019, <http://www.aei.org/publication/trump-doubles-down-on-failed-counterterror-policy/>.